



# Impact of Student Debt on the Physical Therapy Profession

A Report From the American Physical Therapy Association

June 2020

# Letter From the APTA President

There are few things more rewarding than a career as a physical therapist or physical therapist assistant.

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants work with people of all ages and abilities. We help patients and clients rehabilitate from devastating injuries, manage chronic conditions, and create healthy habits. We provide them with alternatives to surgery and prescription drugs. We enable them to return to the activities they love and to do things they've never done before.

In short, we help people maximize their quality of life. And just as special as what we do is how we do it: by partnering with our patients and clients, building strong collaborative relationships, and empowering them to participate in their own care.

To anyone who asks if they should pursue a career as a PT or PTA, my answer is a resounding yes! It's why I'm a physical therapist educator. But the pathway to a successful and meaningful career is not without challenges — and one of the biggest is the cost of education.

Our profession is hardly alone here. The cost of higher education has produced a national crisis of student debt, topping \$1.6 trillion in 2019 and rising. The economic effects of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic will only exacerbate the problem.

Our physical therapy educational institutions are outstanding. Each year they produce thousands of highly qualified graduates to pursue our vision of transforming society by optimizing movement to improve the human experience.

This must continue, but we can't ignore a harsh reality: The cost of a DPT degree has created a significant barrier to the ability of recent graduates to achieve financial stability. It's a barrier to increasing our profession's diversity, which in turn enhances care to all members of society. It's a barrier to participation in our association, which is essential to strengthening the voice of the profession on behalf of our patients. It's a barrier we must dismantle. Now.

Progress must be multifaceted and include improving payment for services provided by PTs and PTAs. The purpose of this report isn't to find a smoking gun or to suggest there is a magic cure. The goal is to establish a shared understanding of the landscape of student loan debt so we can work together to address it.

PTs and PTAs empower people to live their dreams. We must empower them to do the same.

Sincerely,



Sharon L. Dunn, PT, PhD, Board-Certified Orthopaedic Clinical Specialist  
APTA President

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# Executive Summary

Physical therapy is a rewarding profession and a vital health care service to millions of people of all ages and abilities. Despite its appeal and necessity, however, the cost of a doctor of physical therapy degree has created a significant barrier to the ability of recent graduates to achieve financial stability, and it is a deterrent to promising students who must think carefully about the financial implications before pursuing a physical therapy career.

Physical therapy is by no means the only health care discipline feeling the squeeze of student debt, and issues surrounding the cost of education are not unique to our profession. While some data on other professional doctoral programs, and higher education in general, provide some context, this report focuses on a description of the current landscape of DPT and PTA education, responses to the challenge by APTA and others thus far, and recommendations for finding a positive path forward.

## Student Debt Is a Pervasive Challenge Among PTs

Nearly 93% of recent physical therapist graduates are carrying debt, at an average of \$152,882 for all debt except mortgages. For 90% of these PTs, that amount includes considerable outstanding balances in education-related loans; the average amount is \$142,489. Broken out even further, for 89% of PTs with education debt, most of that amount (80%) is attributed to loans for their PT education, the average balance being \$116,183.

Additionally:

- Access to non-loan options for paying for school are limited.
- Due to a challenging health care payment environment, this challenge is likely to get worse.
- The student loan crisis is heightened for those who attend a DPT program in a private school.

These and other findings outlined below resulted from a survey APTA conducted in January 2020 that includes responses from 3,073 physical therapists and 596 physical therapist assistants, all of whom graduated from a PT or PTA program in 2016, 2017, or 2018. The survey assessed the scale and severity of student debt in the physical therapy profession, and gathered respondents' feelings and attitudes toward their education debt. APTA conducted a similar survey in 2017 of 2,839 PTs and 588 PTAs who graduated in 2013, 2014, or 2015. Those results for the most part mirrored the data from the more recent survey, indicating little change in circumstances and attitudes in the time between the two surveys. Thus, unless specified, the information in this report is from the latter survey.

## Student Debt Impacts PTs' Choices and Quality of Life

High levels of student debt influence PTs' decisions and feelings of well-being.

- **PTs select programs based on anticipated debt load.** About 43% of survey respondents said that debt had a high impact on their choice of PT program. While cost is an important factor, it has the potential to override other decision points, such as program quality, reputation, format, faculty, graduation rates and pass rates for the National Physical Therapy Exam.

- **PTs are forgoing or delaying important life milestones because of their student debt.** Most notable are critical financial milestones such as buying a home and contributing to retirement savings.
- **Student debt contributes heavily to anxiety among PTs.** About 70% of PT survey respondents stated that their student debt causes mid- to high-level anxiety on a regular basis. They often used words such as “burden” and “trapped” to describe how their student loans made them feel.

## The PT Profession Also Is Impacted by Student Debt

As much as student debt impacts each student individually, it also affects the profession’s ability to grow, mature, and evolve, if graduates feel they must forgo a preferred career path and choose a position based on the need to repay student loans, if future leaders are limited in their ability to pursue education to its fullest, and if diversity within the profession can’t be optimized to the patient populations it serves.

- **DPT education debt limits career choices.** More than one-quarter of PT respondents indicated they are forgoing or delaying a change in position or practice, and 22% said they are not working in their preferred practice setting.
- **PTs delay or forgo postprofessional education because of debt load.** About a third of PT respondents indicated they are postponing or forgoing pursuit of residencies or other further education, such as academic graduate degrees.
- **PTs often seek out other sources of income because of debt load,** leaving less discretionary time to pursue postprofessional opportunities. Respondents who are African American, part-time employees, and working in a K-12 school system were more likely than average to report having additional sources of income.
- **Certain segments of the PT population are more burdened by student debt.** Of note are non-white PTs, those with lower household incomes, and those with financial dependents. The rising cost of education disproportionately affects students from minority, low socioeconomic status, and first-generation families. This contributes to a lack of diversity in the PT profession that, as with other health care disciplines, fails to reflect the population being served.

## Small Minority of Those Surveyed Are Debt-Free

Slightly more than one-tenth of survey respondents – 11% – reported that they currently had no outstanding student debt. There was no single path among them for achieving it, although financial assistance from family was noted most frequently. Beyond family assistance, those who no longer had debt three years after school reported having paid for their education through more scholarships, work-study income, and personal savings than did the average respondent with debt.

## PTAs Also Face Challenges From Student Debt

Based on the survey, 48% of physical therapist assistants’ total debt burden is attributed to loans for PTA education. Of survey respondents with PTA-related student debt, the average loan balance is \$24,308. A majority of PTAs – 68% – do not feel that their income is adequate for managing their student loan debt.

## Next Steps

There is no silver-bullet solution to the sprawling challenge of student debt, but there are a number of actions that – taken collectively by various groups – could help to reduce the societal, economic, and psychological toll of the student debt burden among PTs and PTAs. APTA is responding, and makes recommendations for further action, to be part of the solution to this challenge that threatens not only the future of physical therapy education but, ultimately, the profession itself.

## APTA Priority Actions

APTA is engaged in high-level efforts toward meeting the following aims that support PT and PTA students who are managing student debt.

- **Enhance the impact of APTA's Financial Solutions Center.** APTA is constantly fine-tuning this award-winning program and seeking ways to widen its reach.
- **Include PTs in the National Health Services Corp Loan Repayment Program.** APTA is a long-time advocate of expanding the program to include physical therapists.
- **Expand scholarships to qualified therapy students who are from underrepresented backgrounds.** Among other efforts, APTA is advocating for passage of the Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act.



## Recommendations

APTA recommends the following actions to reduce the impact of student debt.

- **Make students better aware of the true ratio between physical therapy student debt and expected earnings.** This can be done by improving transparency on the cost of PT and PTA education, and better informing students on what to expect in a starting salary.
- **Improve students' financial literacy.** Beyond school costs and starting salaries, students and graduates need to be better educated about ongoing financial management. Schools can play a role in publicizing resources such as APTA's Financial Solutions Center.
- **More broadly publicize information on alternatives to student loans.** Schools should take the lead in providing clear and more easily accessible information to students on grants, scholarships, and work study programs – and more strongly encourage students to seek them out.
- **Increase awareness of and access to employer assistance and loan repayment.** More emphasis is needed on federal loan forgiveness programs and on educating students and graduates about potential employer loan assistance.
- **Investigate options to re-envision the DPT curriculum.** DPT programs should explore alternative approaches that could decrease the financial burden on students, keeping in mind that one size does not fit all.
- **Engage in further research for more evidence-based data on which to base additional decisions and actions.** While the APTA survey and other studies cited in this report reveal useful information, they also point to the need for more research specific to physical therapy student debt and its impact.

# The Debt Challenge in Physical Therapy Education

Physical therapy is a rewarding profession and a vital health care service to millions of people of all ages and abilities. Regardless of its appeal and necessity, however, the cost of a doctor of physical therapy degree has become an almost insurmountable barrier to the ability of recent graduates to achieve financial stability, and it is a deterrent to promising students who must think carefully about the financial implications before pursuing a physical therapy career.

Physical therapy is by no means the only health care discipline feeling the squeeze of student debt, and issues surrounding the cost of education are not unique to our profession. While some background on other professional doctoral programs, and higher education in general, will provide some context, this report focuses on a description of the current landscape of DPT and PTA education, responses to the challenge by APTA and others thus far, and recommendations for finding a positive path forward.

(Note: This report incorporates the earlier work of the Student Debt Task Force formed in 2017 by the collaborative partners of the Education Leadership Partnership: APTA, the Academy of Physical Therapy Education, and ACAPT. The task force was charged to examine the issues influencing and stemming from physical therapy student debt, and in April 2020 it released a [Final Recommendations Report](#). APTA acknowledges the work of the authors and their contributions to this report.)

## Student Debt Is a Challenge Across the United States

Student debt is undoubtedly a major challenge, and one that is showing little sign of improvement. Some statistics to ponder:

- The balance of outstanding student loans in the U.S. totals more than \$1.6 trillion ([Federal Reserve Bank, 2020](#)).
- On average, the total student loan balance for Americans who hold student debt is nearly \$30,000 ([Institute for College Access & Success, 2018](#)).
- According to a survey conducted by TD Bank, on average, borrowers are spending 20% of their monthly take-home pay on student debt payments ([TD Bank, 2019](#)).
- Graduate programs enroll just 15% of all students in higher education, yet they account for 40% of all federal student loans issued annually ([Miller, 2020](#)).
- The current federal loan system allows graduate students to borrow an essentially uncapped amount at rates that are about 1.5 points higher than those for undergraduate loans ([Federal Student Aid, 2020](#)).

**TOTAL U.S. STUDENT  
LOAN BALANCE IS  
\$1.6 TRILLION**

Student debt is both an economic issue and a personal one, causing debt-holders stress and anxiety, and prohibiting individuals from investing in their present or future well-being.

Students may be drawn to the physical therapy profession for its reputation as a satisfying career and in pursuit of earning potential beyond what they can achieve with an undergrad degree. For many, though — as it is for many students who pursue graduate degrees in virtually all other fields and disciplines — the cost of this education leads to prolonged debt that follows them through a good portion of their work career.

## Student Debt Is a Pervasive Challenge Among Physical Therapists

The challenge of student debt is not unique to physical therapists and physical therapist assistants, nor is the continually rising cost of obtaining a degree. APTA's survey of recent DPT graduates found that 80% of PTs' total education debt is from their PT education. Out of an average total education debt balance of \$142,000, the average amount attributed to PT education debt is \$116,183. (A direct comparison of education debt with other professional doctorates is not available, given that the APTA survey results indicate respondents' current balances rather than total debt incurred. However, for the academic year 2015-2016, the National Center for Education Statistics reported an average of \$171,700 in accumulated debt for those with a professional doctorate, which included dentistry, law, medicine, optometry, pharmacy, podiatry, and veterinary medicine.)

Regarding the last two factors in particular, higher education in general has experienced funding shortfalls and rising costs over the past decade, linked in part to the economic crisis of 2008-2009. Since that time, states have reduced support for higher education, and private institutions have experienced significant losses in investment returns. The result is that the majority of the increased cost burden has fallen to students in the form of tuition increases. This trend is magnified at the doctorate level, and particularly for professional doctoral degrees.

A 2018 study of student debt in professional doctoral health care disciplines analyzed the financial impact and economic burden of degree attainment in medicine, pharmacy, and physical therapy on graduates in their early careers. The study found that

## Physical Therapy Education and COVID-19

At the time of this publication, the world has been experiencing the COVID-19 global pandemic. This and the resulting U.S. economic shutdown have further exacerbated financial stress for physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and students. PTs and PTAs have had to adapt their budgets to address unprecedented professional and personal challenges, while, for many, student loan balances remain subject to repayment. The academic community has been forced to transition studies to remote learning and provide financial support for students.

To alleviate these financial burdens, the federal government enacted the CARES Act, providing funds, student loan payment relief, employer assistance relief, and support for academic institutions. APTA was among the supporters of including assistance for health care education programs and their students in the CARES Act. The provisions are helpful but temporary, and the impact of the national health emergency on physical therapy education and the profession will be seen long after the pandemic ends. While there is no data yet with which to make projections, it's a reasonable assumption that without substantial government assistance higher-education institutions will not be in a financial position to lower or even lessen increases in tuition and fees in the coming years. Creative solutions will be needed now more than ever to address the problem of physical therapy student debt.



student debt and salary data have significant impact on all disciplines; however, results indicated that physical therapist graduates have “high potential for obtaining unmanageable debt due to the costs of education and earning potential” early in their careers ([Pabian, 2018](#)).

Meanwhile, modeling estimated salary growth in a range of medical disciplines alongside estimated student debt incurred by each program, a 2018 analysis of the net present value of a physical therapist education concludes that it is a good investment up to a certain amount of debt. At \$150,000 in student debt, the value of a physical therapist education is lower than that of all health professional careers except veterinary medicine and chiropractic medicine – and once debt exceeds \$266,000, the economic value of a physical therapist degree “no longer exceeded that of a typical bachelor’s degree” ([Shields, 2018](#)).

The American Council of Academic Physical Therapy, acknowledging this unsustainable debt-to-income ratio, released [a statement in March 2020](#) directed to DPT program directors and academic deans, urging universities to consider the changing landscape of the profession both in practice and in academia, “before ... increasing tuition.” The statement further called for “tuition commensurate with expected starting PT salaries of \$65,000 per year...”

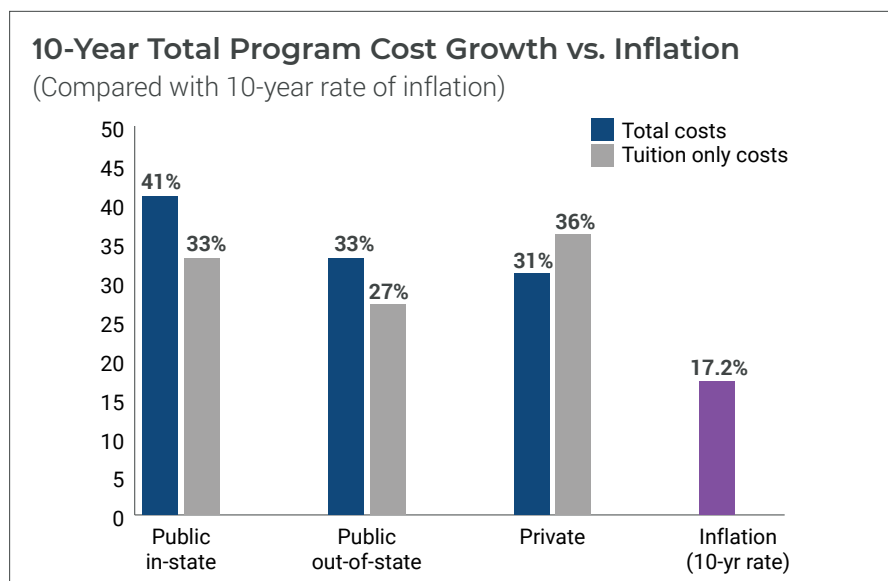
According to the [Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education Aggregate Program Data for 2019](#), the average total tuition cost of a three-year physical therapy doctoral program, excluding room, board, and associated clinical education costs, in 2019 was:

- \$66,074 for the average public, in-state DPT program.
- \$112,421 for the average public, out-of-state DPT program.
- \$112,714 for the average private program.

The graph shows the cost over 10 years, in terms of both base tuition and total cost, of obtaining a DPT. The percentage increases for total cost and tuition cost for both private and public degrees are significantly higher than inflation over the same time period (17.2%). For the purpose of this report, “total cost” is annual tuition, annual fees, and other program costs, excluding room and board and other clinical expenses. The most severe cost increase, the total cost of obtaining a DPT from a public institution (both in-state and out-of-state), is nearly triple the inflation rate for the same period. Even so, average in-state tuition at public institutions remains less than that at private schools.

Currently, the flow of revenue sources (beyond program tuition) to physical therapy programs is not reflected in CAPTE data.

Despite the [Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Outlook Handbook](#) designation of physical therapist as a profession with above-average pay and growth in the United States, entry-level salaries for physical therapists remain low relative to their average debt burden. Steven Ambler’s 2020 study of Florida-based entry-level (up to five years postgraduation) physical therapists found a mean



Source: CAPTE Aggregate Program Data reports, 2010/11-2019/20 academic years

debt-to-income ratio of 197%, and approximately 70% of respondents reported a debt-to-income-ratio of over 100% (Ambler, 2020).

Nationally, there is a lack of comprehensive data illustrating the student debt profile of physical therapists, particularly those at entry-level, who have the lowest incomes and the highest debt balances. Similarly, there is a lack of research regarding how student debt obligations affect physical therapists' personal and professional life choices, and which demographic groups, if any, are disproportionately impacted by student debt burden.

In response to this challenge, APTA has sought to quantify the scope and scale of student debt burden among the PT and PTA community in order to best tackle the issue for the sustainability of the profession. In 2017, APTA, the Academy of Physical Therapy Education, and ACAPT — as collaborative partners of the Education Leadership Partnership — formed a Student Debt Task Force with the goal of examining the issues influencing and stemming from physical therapy student debt. The task force's [Final Recommendations Report](#) was released in April 2020. In addition, APTA sought data directly from those affected by physical therapy student debt: physical therapists and physical therapist assistants recently graduated from their respective program.

## A Nationwide Survey to Examine Student Debt in the Physical Therapy Profession

In addition to exploring trends in physical therapy education debt, graduate and professional studies debt, and student debt in general to create a picture of the current landscape, in January 2020, APTA conducted a survey of 3,073 physical therapists (22% response rate) and 596 physical therapist assistants (12% response rate), all of whom graduated from a PT or PTA education program in 2016, 2017, or 2018. Respondents were both APTA members and nonmembers. The goal of the survey was to determine the level of debt within the physical therapy community and its impact on the profession, in order to support compelling and creative solutions.

APTA conducted a similar survey in 2017 of 2,839 PTs and 588 PTAs who graduated 2013-2015; results for the most part mirrored the data from the more recent survey, indicating little change in circumstances and attitudes in the time between the two surveys. Unless specified, the information in this report is from the latter survey.

The most recent online-survey instrument gathered data between January 17, 2020, and February 20, 2020, among a randomized sample of PTs and PTAs. The respondents' demographics closely match those of the profession as a whole. (See Appendix for an overview of the demographic profile of the survey.)

## APTA Student Debt Survey Underscores the Challenge in the Profession

Of those surveyed, nearly 93% of early-career PT are carrying debt, at an average of \$152,882 for all debt except mortgages. For 90% of these PTs, that includes education-related debt — defined as the sum of reported undergraduate debt (federal and private loans), PT education debt (federal and private loans), and any other education debt — at an average amount of \$142,489. And for 89% of those with education debt, most of that amount (80%) comprises federal or private loans for their PT education. Relative to overall current debt, 73% of PTs' total reported debt is attributed to student loans for their physical therapist education. Similarly, 48% of the PTAs' total debt burden is attributed to private or federal loans for their physical therapy education.

The current average balance of PT education debt for physical therapists is \$116,183 among those who reported debt related to their physical therapist education. Among PTs who reported undergraduate student debt, the average amount was \$40,222. Meanwhile, the national average for undergraduate student loans for the graduating class of 2018 is approximately \$29,200 ([The Institute for College Access & Success, 2018](#)), indicating that physical therapists start out with higher education debt than average before pursuing professional training.

Viewed another way, the average total student debt balance for PT survey respondents who reported debt is \$142,489. For respondents who reported current debt, the average DPT education loan balance (\$116,183) is over three times the average undergraduate student loan balance (\$40,222).

(Note: Because not all respondents with undergraduate debt also have PT education debt, and vice versa, the undergraduate debt average and the PT education debt average are calculated from distinct samples; therefore, the sum of the two, inclusive of “other education debt,” will not equal the “total student debt average,” which is defined as the average total debt burden for all respondents with any education debt.)

**“I don’t think individual schools provide enough scholarship opportunities.”**  
- PT Practicing in Washington State

## Federal Loan Borrowing Drives High Physical Therapy Loan Debt

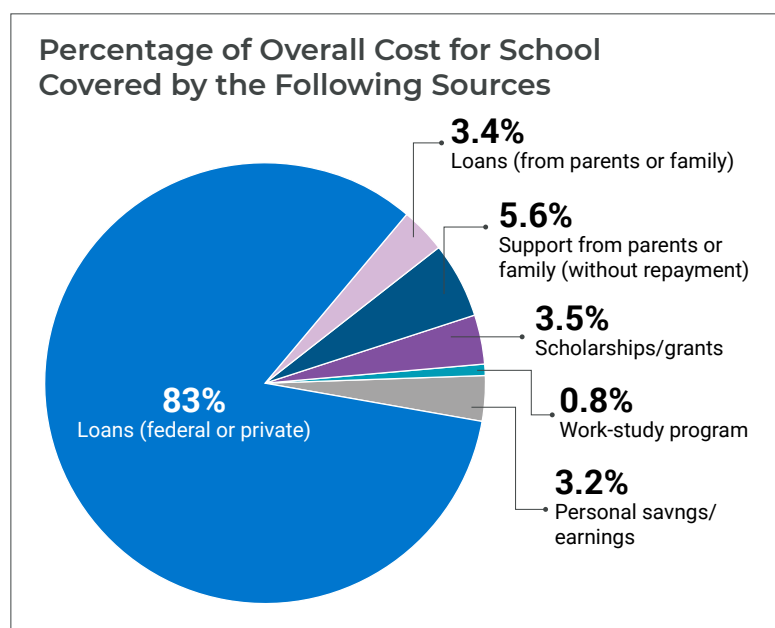
Current physical therapy debt amounts are driven by high federal PT education loan balances (on average \$109,348 reported by survey respondents currently holding debt). While not as high as for federal student loans, the amount of private loans held by respondents to the survey still was substantial at \$66,692.

## Access to Non-Loan Options for Paying for School Are Limited and Not Well Known

Access to financial assistance other than loans is limited, both in dollar amounts and in the number of individuals who were able to pursue this route. One in four respondents paid for their PT education entirely through student loans, and over half of the respondents paid for at least 85% of their PT education through loans.

Of assistance other than loans, on average, 5.6% of respondents’ PT education cost was paid for by personal or family sources that did not require repayment. On average, 3.5% was covered by scholarships or grants. Even when scholarships or grants were awarded, they did not close the gap. The average scholarship or grant received among respondents who reported receiving them was \$15,500. Breaking that down between private and public schools, respondents who attended a DPT program in a private school received, on average, \$21,332 in scholarships or grants, or approximately 58% of the average annual private school tuition cost. For respondents who attended a DPT program in a public school, those paying in-state tuition received, on average, \$8,752.47, or 47% of the mean annual tuition cost, and those paying out-of-state tuition received an average grant or scholarship of \$6,538.40, or 53% of the mean annual tuition cost. This compares with \$14,920 reported by the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) as the average amount for “any grant” received by professional practice doctoral graduates for the 2015-2016 school year — \$17,310 from private institutions and \$11,800 from public institutions.

On the whole, respondents did not feel well informed about non-loan avenues to pay for school. According to the survey, 66% were not well informed about scholarships or awards available to students, and 64% were not well informed about the availability



of paid assistantship and/or work-study opportunities. This information gap contributes to doubt, regret, and uncertainty in the profession – 66% of survey respondents stated they felt they could not determine if the cost of a particular program was a good value proposition. This sentiment is reinforced by comments provided in the survey, as multiple respondents brought up a lack of information about the “debt to salary ratio” that recent DPT program graduates encounter.

Across all states and demographics, loan payback programs are lacking. Only 8% of PT respondents report receiving employer loan payback. Of those who reported receiving employer loan payback, the total anticipated amount averaged \$18,224. The percentage of respondents receiving employer loan payback did not shift significantly since the 2017 APTA survey. However, their median loan pay back was only \$10,000, indicating a significant rise from 2017 to 2019 in payback assistance where available.

At 9%, the percentage of PT respondents who reported receiving non-employer loan payback was not much higher, but the amount – at least as anticipated by respondents – was significantly more: The average anticipated loan payback amount for this group was \$98,664. It is likely that the majority of this group consists of PTs enrolled in the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, which forgives a participant’s remaining loan balance after the individual has made 120 monthly payments under a qualified repayment plan while working full-time for a qualifying employer. Of the 55 respondents who indicated they work in a school system (preschool/primary/secondary), 14 mentioned that they relied on the PSLF program.

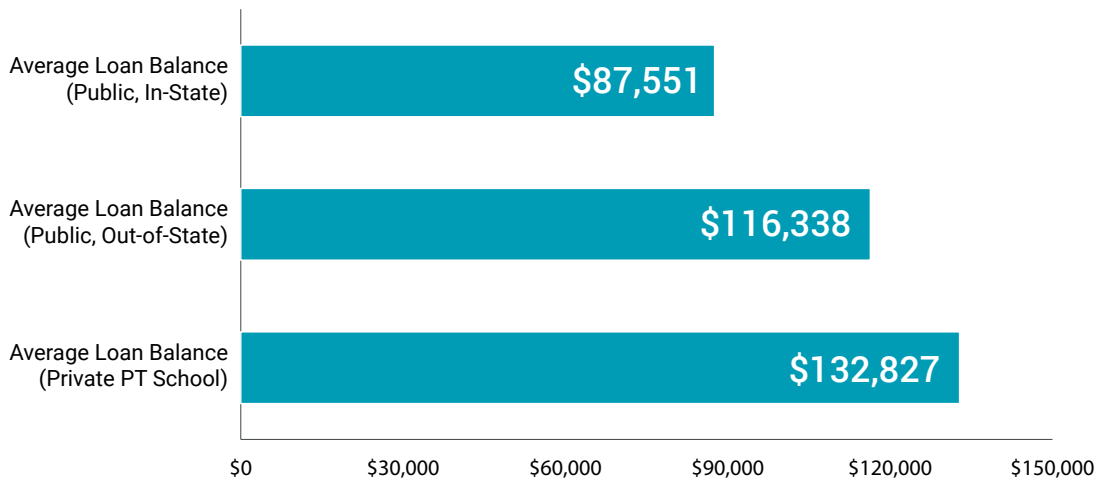
Qualified employers for physical therapists include public schools (K-12), the armed services, and nonprofit employees, which includes some hospital systems. Unfortunately, despite the promise of loan relief, the PSLF program has been widely documented as an unreliable resource, with participants often participating for years in select loan repayment plans only to be notified suddenly that their plan no longer qualifies and that they are no longer enrolled as a PSLF participant. The [Government Accountability Office reported in 2019](#) that only 1% of applications had been approved, citing the program as “not clear to borrowers,” “confusing,” and “not aligned with [the Department of] Education’s strategic goal to improve customer service to borrowers.” A New York Times article in November 2019 pointed to the program’s “shoddy service, mismanagement, and poor record keeping.”

## The Student Loan Challenge Is Heightened for Students in a DPT Program in a Private School

PTs who attended public school constituted 43% of respondents, 92.5% of whom paid in-state tuition. Among those who reported debt from PT education, the average PT education student loan balance was significantly greater for those who attended DPT Program in a private school (\$132,827) than for those who attended a DPT program in a public school (\$87,551 for in-state students and \$116,337 for out-of-state students).

**“I am in the PSLF; my biggest concern is the lack of reliability of this program and the accumulating interest plus original debt I’ll be left with if PSLF doesn’t pan out.”** –Hospital-Based PT

## Average Student Loan Balances by PT Education Program Type



(While the average loan balance for out-of-state tuition is much higher than for in-state tuition, only a relatively small percentage of respondents – 7.5% of the overall sample – chose to pursue out-of-state public education.)

It is not surprising, then, that those who attended public school were more likely to feel that their salary is adequate for managing student loans (21%) than those who attended private school (13%), even though the private school cohort's salaries averaged nearly \$2,000 higher than the public school cohort.

## Without Significant Improvement in Pay, This Challenge Is Only Going to Worsen

With few options for employer assistance or loan forgiveness, physical therapist respondents anticipate taking an average of 16.2 years to pay off their total student debt loan balance. In reality, this figure is likely a low estimate given that [according to the U.S. Department of Education](#), individuals take approximately 20 years on average to fully pay off debt between \$20,000 and \$40,000, indicating a longer payment timeline for a lower debt range than that of the mean APTA survey respondent.

Physical therapists' reported areas of current practice also are heavily concentrated in California and New York – states with the third and fourth highest costs of living, respectively – and in the metropolitan centers of Texas and Pennsylvania. This does not necessarily correlate with high salaries, however. For example, while PTs in California on average have a slightly higher income, average income for PTs in New York is on par with the national average. Compounding the issue, the median income of PTs who are within three years out of school has remained relatively even from APTA's 2017 survey to present, increasing slightly from \$70,000 to \$72,000 over the three-year period.

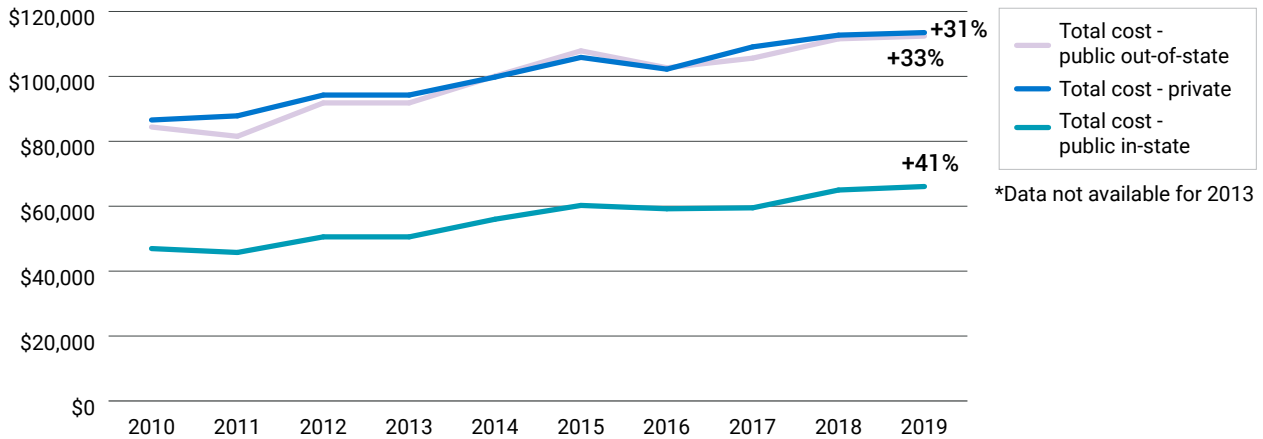
On average, 84% of PT respondents felt as if their pay is not adequate to manage their student loan burden. Looking back further, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that physical therapists' median annual earnings have increased by approximately 10% for the period 2010-2019. Average DPT total program costs have increased at a significantly higher rate than physical therapists' earnings over that same time period – 31% for private schools and 53% for public schools. Notably, the 10% median annual

**“I declined to attend a private school for my PT education due to the high cost. I reapplied in order to get into an in-state public school so I could actually pay it off. The difference is astounding.”**

–PT Practicing in North Carolina

earnings increase from 2010-2019 falls under the rate of inflation for that same period of time (17.2%), indicating that physical therapists' earnings cannot keep pace with increases in the average American's cost of living, much less the cost increases found in higher education. (Wage and salary data sourced from the 2019 [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) current population survey. Program cost data sourced from the [CAPTE Aggregate Program Data](#) 2019 Physical Therapist Education Programs Fact Sheets.)

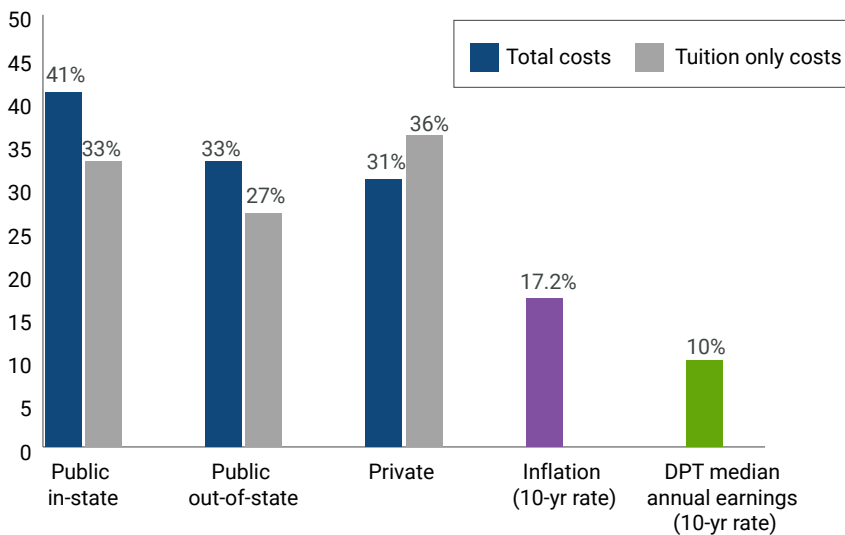
### DPT Total Program Costs Over Time



Source: CAPTE Aggregate Program Data reports, 2010/11-2019/20 academic years

### 10-Year Growth in Total Program Costs vs. Tuition-Only Costs

(Compared with 10-year rate of inflation and of DPT median annual earnings)



Sources: CAPTE Aggregate Program Data reports, 2010-2019; U.S. BLS Current Population Survey data.

# Student Debt Impact on PTs

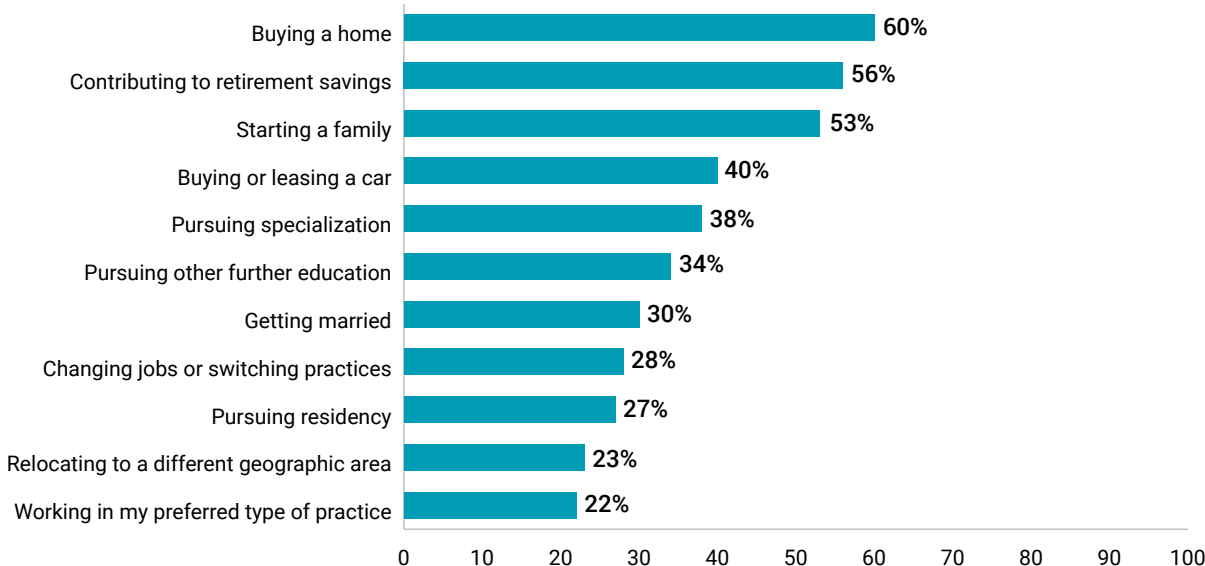
## PTs Select Programs Based on Anticipated Debt Load

The cost of PT education and its associated debt impact students' choice of PT programs. According to the survey, 43% of PT survey respondents stated that the cost of a PT program had a reasonable-to-major impact on program choice. Cost of tuition had a much higher impact on school choice for students who attended a DPT program in a public school: 69% of this group listed cost as having a reasonable-to-major impact on PT program choice. While cost is an important factor, it has the potential to override other decision points, such as program quality, reputation, format, faculty, graduation rates, and NPTE pass rates.

## PTs are Forgoing or Delaying Important Life Milestones Because of Their Student Debt

Based on survey responses, student debt impacts the life choices that physical therapists feel are available to them. The decisions to buy a house and to contribute to retirement savings are particularly affected by the debt burden, signaling a ripple effect for years to come. Student debt is causing PTs to forgo many quintessential components of the American dream. 60% of PT respondents said debt has caused them to delay or forgo buying a home, and 56% said debt caused them to delay or forgo contributing to retirement savings. Additionally, 53% of respondents said that debt has affected their decision to delay or forgo starting a family, and 40% said debt has affected their decision to delay or forgo to buy or lease a car.

### Number of PT Respondents Who Chose to Forgo or Delay the Following Due to Student Debt



## Student Debt Contributes Heavily to Anxiety Among PTs

Student debt burdens affect the mental health of PTs as well as their social and economic well-being; 70% of PT survey respondents reported that their student debt regularly causes mid- to high-level anxiety. Given the impact it can have on everything from school selection to job options to the need for a second income, it would not be surprising to find that student debt is a lead contributor to professional burnout. A 2019 APTA PT in Motion magazine article addressed burnout, acknowledging the role of student debt but noting a lack of validating research ([Ries, 2019](#)).

When asked to indicate a word most associated with student debt, respondents most frequently cited **“burden,” “unfair,” “stressful,” and “crushing.”**

## Certain Segments of the PT Population Are More Burdened by Student Debt

Women have been well represented in the physical therapy workforce throughout its history. In 2019, 61% of DPT students were women ([CAPTE, 2019](#)), whereas only 36% of active physicians were women, [according to 2018-2019 data from the American Association of Medical Colleges](#). But racial and ethnic minorities often are underrepresented in physical therapy. In 2019, 4% of enrolled students were black or African American, 10% were Asian or Pacific islander, 7% were Hispanic, fewer than 1% were American Indian/Native Alaskan, and 3% were of two or more races, according to the Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education. Meanwhile, the percentages of those accepted into medical programs overall were 7% African American, 22% Asian, and 6% Hispanic ([AAMC, 2019](#)).

The [National Association of Black Physical Therapists has stated](#): “There are many initiatives and programs with the centrality on diversity in physical therapy programs; however, there still remains a paucity of enrolled URM [underrepresented minority] students in DPT programs and in URM licensed PTs.”

APTA consistently advocates for increasing diversity and providing resources for minorities. The association's Minority Scholarship Award program has provided more than \$1 million in awards over the years. In 2019, APTA lobbied for the [Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act of 2019](#) (H.R. 3637/S. 2747), which would set aside federal funds for scholarships and stipends for students from underrepresented racial or ethnic minority populations. (The legislation as of this writing has passed in the U.S. House of Representatives and is awaiting action in the U.S. Senate.) Most recently, APTA created the Dimensions of Diversity Fund to expand the association's efforts to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion within the profession and the association. APTA also announced its Campaign for Future Generations, a two-year initiative that will leverage net proceeds from activities related to the association's centennial activities in 2021 as well as accept individual donations to the Dimensions of Diversity Fund or Minority Scholarship Fund.

Breaking down the data from the APTA survey:

**Non-white PTs.** Physical therapist respondents were overwhelmingly white, comprising 90% of respondents who answered that question in the survey. Of those reporting outstanding debt, white respondents reported lower current PT education student debt balances on average (\$97,268) than did non-white respondents (\$111,543). (For purposes of this survey, “non-white” respondents include those who self-identify as one or more of the following racial and ethnic identities: Hispanic/Latino(a), American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, black or African American, and Native Hawaii or other Pacific Islander.) Furthermore,

**“I feel like my student loan debt dictates a lot in my life and makes it very difficult for me to do a lot of things that I'd like to do.”**

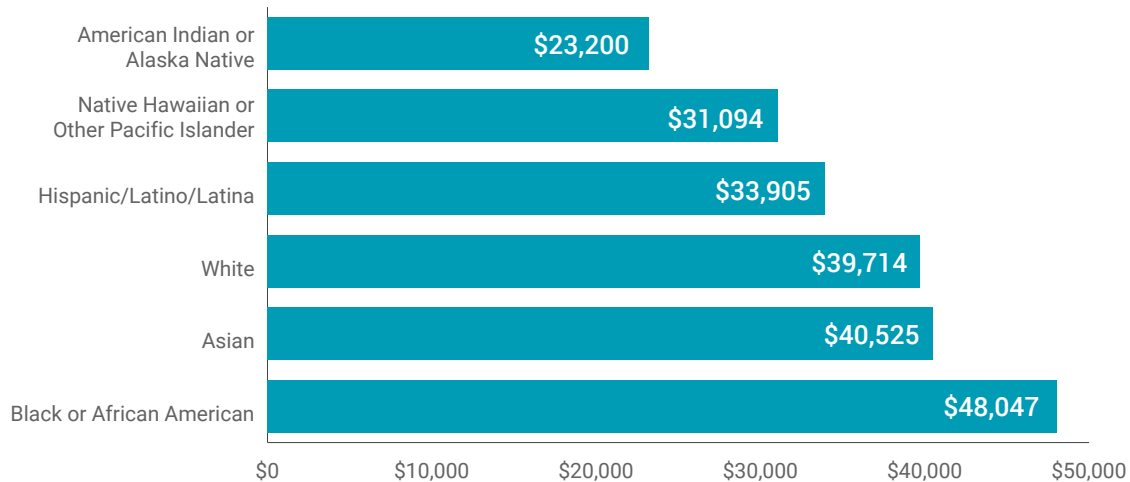
—Private Practice PT in Vermont



physical therapists from non-white backgrounds reported receiving less family assistance to help pay for their PT education – 7.07% of funding versus 9.33% of funding for white respondents.

The survey data also shows that non-white students had a higher debt burden prior to starting their DPT program. This trend is most severe among black or African American respondents. Those who had outstanding student debt reported \$48,047 in undergraduate student debt on average, approximately 1.2 times higher than the average undergraduate student debt reported by white physical therapists. (The difference is similar to findings in a [2016 Brookings Institution study](#) that indicated black college graduates’ undergraduate student debt was 1.3 times that of their white peers.)

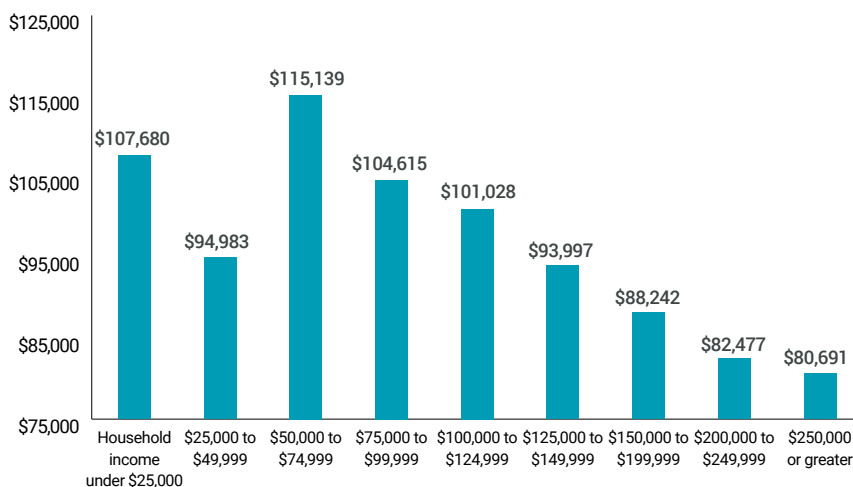
### Average Undergraduate Student Loan Balance



(Note: 24 respondents to the survey identified as Native American or Alaska Native, and 24 respondents identified as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. Neither group is large enough to derive statistically significant data cuts from these demographics.)

**Lower household income.** Generally, the higher a respondent’s household income, the lower their total PT student loan education balance tended to be. While this would be a logical conclusion, it did not hold true for those with household incomes under \$25,000. This could be the result of a variety of factors, such as higher levels of loan forgiveness, (an answer to that question was beyond the scope of the survey). Excluding the lowest tier of household income, the average total PT debt for those at the second lowest tier is \$115,000, and this average decreases steadily as reported household income climbs.

### Average Total PT Education Student Loan Balance By Household Income



**Those caring for dependents.** Respondents with one or more financial dependents estimate it will take 1.5 years longer on average (17.2 years) to pay off their full student debt balance than those with no dependents (15.7 years).

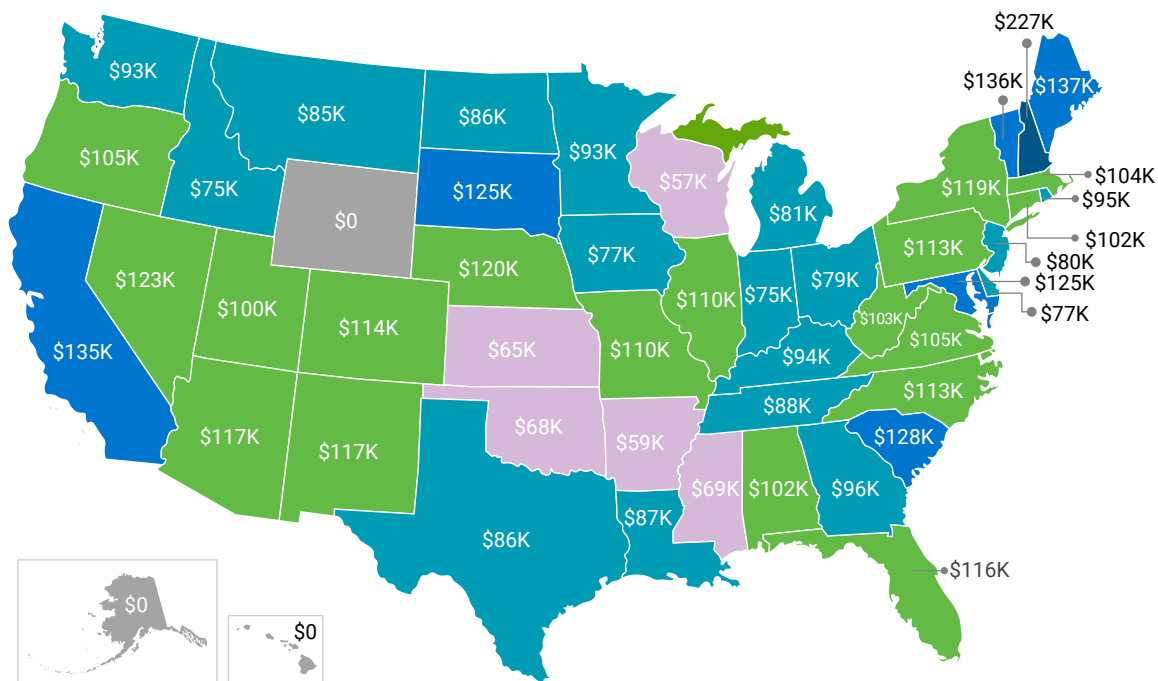
## PT Student Debt Is More Concentrated in Certain Areas

PTs across the country are saddled with a sizeable debt burden, averaging \$116,183, but that debt isn't distributed evenly among the states. When the survey respondents were sorted by the state where they attended their DPT program, certain states were found to have higher averages of PT education debt than others.

The five states with the highest average amounts of PT education debt were New Hampshire (\$227,000), Maine (\$137,000), Vermont (\$136,000), California (\$135,000) and South Carolina (\$128,000).

The five states with the lowest average PT education debt (other than Alaska, Hawaii, and Wyoming, with reported debt of \$0) were Wisconsin (\$57,000), Arkansas (\$59,000), Kansas (\$65,000), Oklahoma (\$68,000), and Mississippi (\$69,000).

## Total PT Education Student Loan Balance by State Where Students Attended DPT Program



Physical therapists were slightly more likely (53%) to remain working in the state in which they attended their DPT program than they were to move after school to practice elsewhere (47%).

States with the highest concentration of PTs practicing in the state where they received their PT education were Mississippi (88%), New Mexico (86%), California (74%), Arkansas (74%), and Minnesota (74%).

States with the highest concentration of out-of-state-educated PTs were Connecticut (29%), North Dakota (29%), Maine (23%), New Hampshire (13%), and the District of Columbia (12%).

# PT Debt Impact on the Profession

As much as student debt impacts each PT individually, it also affects the profession's ability to grow, mature, and evolve, if graduates feel they must forgo a preferred career path and choose a position based on the need to repay student loans, if future leaders are limited in their ability to pursue education to its fullest, and if diversity within the profession can't be optimized to the patient populations it serves.

## PT Education Debt Limits Career Choices

About 28% of PT respondents indicated they are forgoing or delaying a change in position or practice, and 22% do without working in their preferred practice setting. Meanwhile, a 2020 study published in PTJ addressed the influence of student debt on job decision. The survey of Florida DPT graduates came to a similar conclusion: 28% of respondents said that debt was a barrier to practicing in the setting of their choice, and, overall, 57% of respondents acknowledged that student debt had affected their practice choice, with that relationship growing stronger as levels of debt increased ([Ambler, 2020](#)).

## PT Education Debt Limits Further Education and Profession Expansion

The present levels of student debt from undergraduate and PT education may be discouraging physical therapist professionals from pursuing specialization, residency, or other postprofessional education. Of the PT survey respondents without specialist certification, fewer than half (48%) have plans to pursue it, 15% have no plans to pursue it, and 37% are unsure. These numbers are consistent with the findings of the 2017 survey, which saw 47% planning to pursue specialization, 10% unwilling, and 33% unsure. This continuing trend could be a contributing factor to the fact that out of approximately 224,246 licensed PTs in the United States, nearly 23,500, or only 10.5%, are board-certified specialists (ABPTS, May 2020).

As for residencies, approximately 33% of PT respondents indicated that they have chosen to postpone or forgo pursuing residency due to student debt. A similar percentage indicated they have chosen to postpone or forgo pursuing other postprofessional education due to student debt.

## PTs Often Seek Out Other Sources of Income

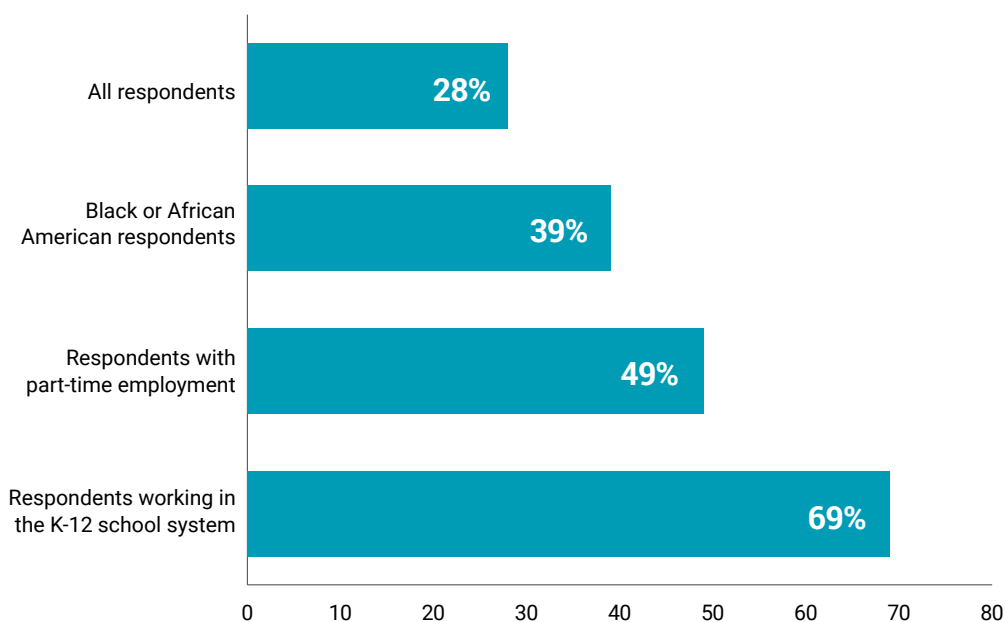
PT education debt also may be driving PTs to seek additional sources of income, leaving less discretionary time to pursue postprofessional



education opportunities such as advanced degrees, specialization, or residencies. Working another job out of necessity to pay off debt while making ends meet also contributes to stress, increasing the risk of burnout in the profession. On average, 28% of PT survey respondents reported having other paid employment besides their primary position. The number of PTs with other paid employment has risen slightly since 2017, when 24% reported having other paid employment.

Black or African American respondents are, on average, 11% more likely than average to have additional sources of income. While the vast majority of respondents (91%) currently practice physical therapy full time, either salaried, hourly, or self-employed, 8% of respondents practice part time. The remainder of respondents (1%) were unemployed, split evenly between those seeking work and those not seeking work. A higher percentage of PTs practicing part time than those practicing full time reported secondary sources of income (49% versus 28%).

### PT Respondents With Paid Employment Other Than Their Primary Position



PT respondents currently employed by a K-12 school system are also significantly more likely to have an additional source of income (average 69%), possibly due to the frequency of nine-month contracts for public school employees. School system employees have the highest average PT education loan balance (\$114,148) out of all workplaces studied, and they report the second-lowest average income of all professional groups. However, among professional groups studied, K-12 school system employees are the most likely to receive non-employer loan forgiveness, with 21% of this group indicating that they anticipated an expected average amount of \$112,115. This could be because the school systems are eligible employers under the NSLF program, but a definitive answer was beyond the scope of the survey.

# Spotlight on Respondents With no Student Debt

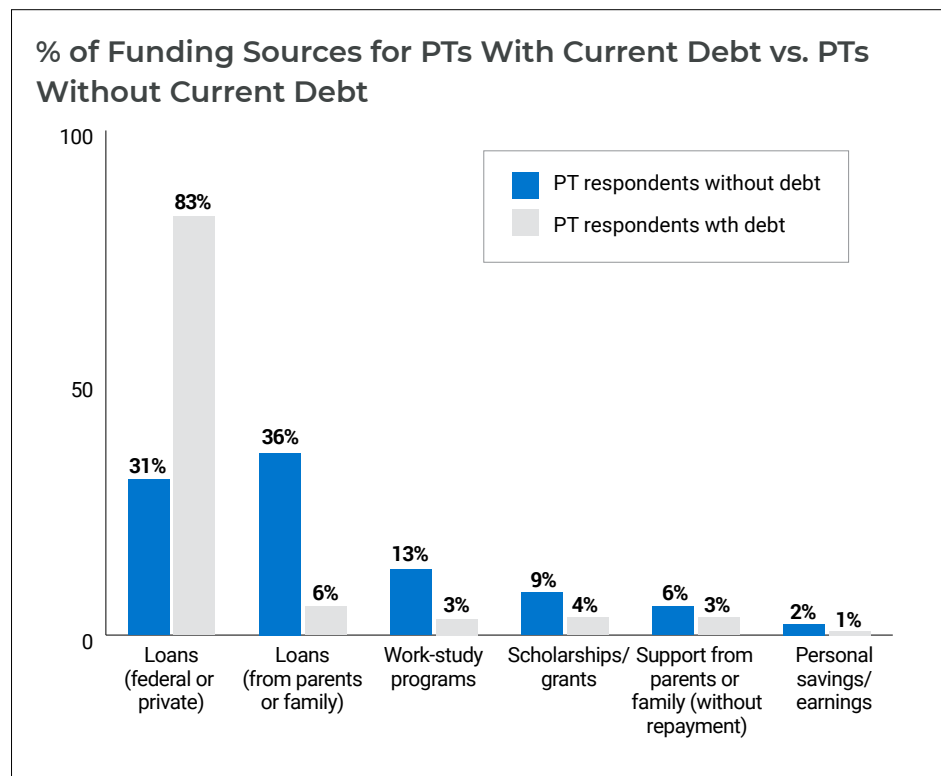
## There Is no Clear Path To Becoming Debt Free

A minority of the study respondents — 11% — reported they had no current federal or private student loan debt resulting from their PT education, indicating they either never took on debt or were able to pay it off within three years of graduating. This group reported paying for school through a greater variety of funding sources than did the general respondent pool, and they reported a lower reliance on loans to fund education.

Those without PT education debt reported that an average of 31% of their PT education was paid for by federal or private loans — a significantly lower proportion than the average for those with current student debt (83%).

Compared with respondents with PT education debt, those without debt reported higher rates of family support (36% versus 6%), use of own savings (13% versus 4%), and support from scholarships and grants (8.5% versus 3%). While support from family certainly contributes to this group's ability to pay for schooling, it's clear that the group without debt leveraged a wider range of funding sources than did the average respondent with current student debt.

The group with no PT education debt has a higher median income (\$77,000) than the total respondent pool median income (\$72,000) and was significantly less likely to indicate delaying or forgoing a home purchase due to student debt (15% versus 60%). The race and gender demographic breakdown of this group is not distinctly different from the demographics of the total study.



# Student Debt Impact on PTAs

## PTAs Face Debt Challenges

Physical therapist assistants also have significant debt from physical therapy schooling, with their total average PTA education debt amounting to \$24,308. Financial assistance for PTAs is also severely lacking, with the average scholarship/grant received averaging \$2,782.

PTAs typically feel as if they were well informed on most aspects of schooling, including cost, tuition, clinical costs, additional fees, and room and board. Cost had a broad-ranging effect on PTA respondents' choice of school, but the highest percentage (45%) felt that cost had a reasonable-to-major effect on their overall choice. Loan payback programs were less prevalent for PTAs than for PTs, with no respondents reporting non-employer loan forgiveness and only 3% receiving employer loan payback.

Student debt has prevented some PTAs from pursuing further training and education. One in three (33%) of PTA respondents reported that they chose to delay or forgo the PTA Advanced Proficiency Pathways Program due to their debt. Only 3% of PTA respondents are currently enrolled in the program.

The majority of PTA respondents (68%) do not feel that their income is adequate for managing their student loan debt. On average, 28% of PTA respondents have additional sources of income beyond their current PTA position. Similar to PT respondents, this is particularly true for those with part-time roles (salaried, hourly) or who are self-employed.

Student debt has a clear and defined effect on the life choices of PTAs. The ability to buy a home and contribute to savings have been the most markedly affected, and student debt plays a role in most major life decisions for PTAs: 35% reported that student debt has caused them to delay or forgo buying a home, 33% reported that debt has caused them to delay or forgo contributing to retirement savings, 23% reported an effect on willingness to start a family, and 21% reported an effect on willingness to buy or lease a car. Less pronounced, but still present, are choices related to job preference: Because of their student debt, 13% of PTA respondents are forgoing a job shift, and 9% have forgone working in their preferred practice setting.

Racial and ethnic minorities are underrepresented in PTA programs as well as in DPT programs. In 2019, 14% of PTA program enrollees were Hispanic, 6% were African American, 6.5% were Asian or Pacific Islander, less than 1% were American Indian, and 3% were "other," according to the Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education. Meanwhile, for all associate degrees conferred in the academic year 2014-2015, the National Center for Education Statistics reported the following: 18% were Hispanic, 14% were black, 5% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% were American Indian/Alaska Native, and 3% were of two or more races.

These limitations have cascading effects for social, emotional, and economic well-being. PTA respondents most frequently use the words "**stress**," "**crushing**," and "**trapped**" to describe their student debt burdens.

# Next Steps

Student debt is impacting many facets of physical therapy in ways that hinder the profession's growth and the well-being of physical therapists and physical therapist assistants. There is no silver bullet to solve such a sprawling challenge, but there are a number of actions that — when taken collectively by various groups — could help to reduce the societal, economic, and psychological toll of the student debt burden among PTs and PTAs. APTA is responding, and makes recommendations for further action, to be part of the solution to this challenge that threatens not only the future of physical therapy education but, ultimately, the profession itself.

## APTA Priority Actions

APTA is engaged in high-level efforts toward meeting the following aims that support PT and PTA students who are managing student debt. Each action is described in more detail following this summary list.

- **Enhance the impact of APTA's Financial Solutions Center.** APTA is constantly fine-tuning this award-winning program and seeking ways to widen its reach.
- **Include PTs in the National Health Services Corp Loan Repayment Program.** APTA has been a long-time advocate of expanding the program to include physical therapists.
- **Expand scholarships to qualified therapy students who are from underrepresented backgrounds.** Among other efforts, APTA is advocating for passage of the Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act, which would award grants and contracts to eligible entities to increase educational opportunities in physical therapy.

## Enhance the Impact of APTA's Financial Solutions Center

As a centralized hub of resources for PT and PTAs regarding all financial matters, including student debt, the APTA Financial Solutions Center assists students and early-career professionals in their career journey.

The APTA Financial Solutions Center provides resources and information to help everyone from prospective students and their families to seasoned PTs and PTAs navigate personal finance questions, including many resources specific to the challenges of planning for and managing student debt. Since the introduction of this resource in April 2017, the Financial Solutions Center has added to its resources, grown in popularity, and won an award from the American Society of Association Executives. The center includes a learning environment, powered by Enrich (a company that provides financial literacy resources), and student loan refinancing through Laurel Road, which offers a discount to association members. Of note, APTA was successful in having an exception made to the refinancing company's usual policy in order to include refinancing for loans on associate degrees, making the program accessible to PTAs as well as to PTs.

To ensure that APTA members are empowered to understand and manage student debt, APTA continually analyzes information regarding usage of the center, researches similar efforts by other related professional societies, and seeks member perceptions of the center to better understand:

- Which of the programs and tools currently being offered are of greatest value?
- Where are there gaps or additional areas of focus that would support our members?
- How can we better support our members' needs as they relate to managing their student debt?
- Are there best practices that can be adopted from similar organizations in different fields?

In addition, APTA heavily publicizes the Financial Solutions Center to broaden its use. The resource is included in member recruitment materials, promotional emails, advertising in APTA publications and on its website, news updates, social media, and more. In addition, PTCAS, APTA's centralized application system, links to relevant Financial Solutions Center learning modules as a resource for prospective students.

Despite APTA's efforts, far more students could be made aware of the resources offered by the Financial Solutions Center. PT and PTA programs are a logical choice to amplify the message, and the Recommendations section below calls for academic programs to require completion of certain modules within the Financial Solutions Center as part of the application process or prior to newly admitted students meeting with their financial aid counselor at the start of the program. ACAPT could advocate to its member PT programs for inclusion of the requirement.

### **Include PTs in the National Health Services Corp Loan Repayment Program**

The vast majority (72%) of physical therapists in APTA's survey affirmed they would be interested in receiving \$50,000 in loan forgiveness in exchange for working two years in an underserved area. The [Physical Therapist Workforce and Patient Access Act of 2019](#) (H.R. 2802/S. 970) would add physical therapists to the NHSC Loan Repayment Program, helping to ensure that individuals in rural and underserved areas have access to nonpharmacological options for the prevention, treatment, and management of pain.

APTA has long been a strong advocate for [expansion of the National Health Services Corps Loan Repayment Program](#) to include physical therapists, as it could both ease the student debt burdens of PTs and expand access to nonpharmacological pain management options in underserved areas that are more hard-hit by the national epidemic of opioid overuse and abuse. Legislation to add PTs to the NHSC program is one of APTA's public policy priorities toward the goal of eliminating barriers to health care services. [A position paper on the Physical Therapist Workforce and Patient Access Act](#) (H.R. 2802/S. 970) outlines the association's argument for adding PTs to the program, and APTA Take Action Center provides members easy access to the template letter to send to their members of Congress. In addition, APTA students have led several nationwide "flash action strategy" initiatives to advocate for passage of the H.R. 2802/S. 970. The annual event is a 48-hour window of intense communication through social media to encourage messages to Congress.

### **Expand Scholarships to Qualified Therapy Students Who Are From Underrepresented Backgrounds**

APTA is an advocate for the [Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act](#) (H.R. 3637/S. 2747), which would expand scholarships to qualified therapy students who are from underrepresented backgrounds. The legislation calls for a scholarship program in the professions of physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech language pathology, and audiology for individuals from underrepresented populations including students from racial and ethnic minorities. As of this writing, the bill has been introduced in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate.



APTA's own Minority Scholarship Award has provided longstanding support for eligible students and faculty, and has awarded more than \$1 million to over 200 individuals since it was established in 1988. Donations are collected through an annual fundraiser, membership renewal check-off, and single contributions.

APTA also encourages eligible academic programs to seek scholarship funds through the federal Health Resources and Services Administration's [Scholarships for Disadvantaged Students Program](#). The program provided funding to 15 DPT programs in 2019.

## Recommendations

APTA recommends the following actions to reduce the impact of student debt. Each recommendation is described in more detail following this summary list.

- **Make students better aware of the true ratio between physical therapy student debt and expected earnings.** This can be done by improving transparency on the cost of PT and PTA education, and better informing students on starting salary information.
- **Improve students' financial literacy.** Beyond school costs and starting salaries, students and graduates need to be better educated about ongoing financial management. Schools can play a role in publicizing resources such as APTA's Financial Solutions Center.
- **More broadly publicize information on alternatives to student loans.** Schools should take the lead in providing clearer and more easily accessible information to students on grants, scholarships, and work-study programs – and more strongly encourage students to seek them out.
- **Increase awareness of and access to employer assistance and loan repayment.** More emphasis is needed on federal loan forgiveness programs and on educating students and graduates about potential employer loan assistance
- **Investigate options to re-envision the DPT curriculum.** DPT programs should explore alternative approaches that could decrease the financial burden on students, keeping in mind that one size does not fit all.
- **Engage in further research for more evidence-based data on which to base additional decisions and actions.** While the APTA survey and other studies cited in this report reveal useful information, they also point to the need for more data specific to physical therapy student debt.

### Make Students Better Aware of the True Ratio Between Physical Therapy Student Debt and Expected Earnings

Shields and Dudley-Javoroski (2018) conducted a study examining net present value across several health professions. NPV is a modelling technique to estimate the economic consequences of an investment by using educational costs, wages, and duration of a career. They reported that physical therapist education is a good investment up to a certain amount of debt. At \$150,000 of debt, the NPV for the DPT is lower than all health professions careers other than veterinary medicine and chiropractic, and once debt exceeds \$266,000, the economic value of a physical therapist degree "no longer exceeded that of a typical bachelor's degree."

Of PTs surveyed, 35% had debt exceeding \$150,000 and 18% had debt above \$200,000 – underscoring that an alarming number of physical therapists are in dangerous territory in terms of their debt-to-salary ratio in the first three years after graduation.

Students and prospective students are seeking clearer, more transparent, and more readily available data to understand the true debt-to-salary ratio of pursuing a PT or PTA education. This requires a two-pronged approach

– better education about the true cost of education and potential debt, and better education about salaries.

**Improve transparency on the true cost of PT and PTA education.** While some high-level costs, including tuition and basic living expenses, are moderately understood by prospective students, there are a number of other costs that are less transparent to students. These include program fees and clinical education costs, as well as travel and local living costs, the last two especially for students whose DPT program is in a different location from their undergraduate institution. As such, DPT programs should advocate to their institutions to seek ways to create a more transparent and standardized reporting on the true cost of education. While the onus is on each program, CAPTE and ACAPT could work with DPT programs toward this goal. Programs should consult with their institution’s financial aid office to ensure an accurate understanding of PT students’ borrowing needs and that financial aid packages best represent actual costs.

A lack of information and awareness about the true cost of school limits physical therapy students’ and PTs’ understanding of the severity of their student debt burden and their ability to plan for their futures accordingly. Students feel reasonably informed about baseline tuition costs, but respondents to APTA’s latest survey felt they had less insight into other costs such as those associated with clinical education and other fees for the program.

How well-informed were you about the following at the time that you selected your PT program?				
	Tuition	Room and board	Cost associated with clinical education	Additional Fees
Not at all well-informed	7%	10%	24%	16%
Somewhat not well-informed	13%	15%	26%	26%
Neither well-informed nor not well-informed	23%	24%	24%	28%
Somewhat well-informed	26%	25%	14%	19%
Very well-informed	29%	23%	10%	9%

While CAPTE provides some of this data at an aggregate level, it can be challenging for students to understand all the variables that lead to the true and total cost of acquiring an education. CAPTE could require each school to publish these “hidden” costs related to clinical education and other fees. These fees include other costs of education that are built into a student’s financial package, such as room and board, books and other materials or equipment, insurance, transportation, etc.

The Education Leadership Partnership Student Debt Task Force Study echoes this recommendation for transparency, calling for schools to create a unified, transparent data set on the cost of school that is made available on their websites and aggregated through CAPTE. The partnership’s report recommends data that DPT and PTA programs should be encouraged to delineate in order to make aggregate data accessible to prospective and current students, so that costs can be better compared between schools. Such data includes:

- Type of program (public, private not-for-profit, private for-profit).
- Length of program.
- Number of terms.
- Credit hours (didactic and clinical).
- Total weeks of full-time clinical education.

- Whether program has integrated clinical experiences that require student travel and housing.
- Tuition cost (in-state and out-of-state for public institutions)
- Required textbooks.
- Program fees.
- Institutional fees.
- Average adjusted cost of living expenses.
- Average clinical education costs (including travel and relocation).
- Range of total clinical education costs.
- Other program-specific costs.
- Assistantships, fellowships, scholarships (number of recipients annually, duration, and dollar amount).
- Whether the program formally discourages student employment while enrolled (and if not, how many students are employed).
- Average student debt from the program.
- Average PT or PTA student debt after completing the program.

**“Bottom line: Nobody really put it in terms of real money as to what a starting salary was for PTs compared to the amount of debt they have coming out of school.”**

–Certified-Specialist PT

**Better inform students on starting salary information.** While numerous resources provide salary data for physical therapists, including the Bureau of Labor Statistics and APTA’s salary data reports, the APTA survey results show an information gap whereby incoming students did not feel equipped with the data to understand their likely earning potential and how their debt-to-salary ratio will shape their ability to manage their loans and pay other expenses.

The majority of PTs and PTAs who responded to APTA’s survey do not feel that their current salaries can cover their loan balances. Many respondents noted that while information about average salaries is readily available, they did not begin their education well-informed about their likely starting salary, and thus they did not have a solid grasp of how their debt-to-salary ratio would impact their lives after graduation. Over 50% of respondents felt they were not at all or only a little informed about starting salaries when selecting their PT program.

How well-informed were you about starting salaries at the time that you selected your PT program?	
Not at all well-informed	23%
Somewhat not well-informed	28%
Neither well-informed nor not well-informed	28%
Somewhat well-informed	16%
Very well-informed	5%

### Improve Students’ Financial Literacy

Academic programs should strive to make their first-year students well-versed in financial management and the economic realities of their career path so they make smart decisions as students and best prepared at graduation. Resources such as the APTA Financial Solutions Center, which includes free online financial education tools from Enrich, can be helpful in this regard. APTA can also ensure that its student recruitment initiatives offer information on median starting salaries and include data from this report about the cost of education.

### More Broadly Publicize Information on Alternatives to Student Loans

The vast majority of education costs are covered by student loans, for PT and PTA education and for higher education in general. And while most non-loan options are neither plentiful nor high yielding, they should not be overlooked. APTA's survey shows that for the most part PT students feel uninformed about non-loan financing options, and they would benefit from increased awareness of opportunities for financing education that do not require repayment. Higher education institutions should make scholarships and grants, both institution-sponsored and national, readily available to all program participants through a consistent, transparent system. Students should be able to find and apply to these sources of non-loan payment with as few barriers as possible. Schools that discourage work-study participation could reconsider, thinking creatively for ways to serve both students in attaining their education and the overarching interests of the education programs.

## **Increase Awareness of and Access to Employer Assistance and Loan Repayment**

Fewer than 10% of PTs who responded to APTA's survey said they received assistance from their employer or from loan forgiveness programs, and those who do cite anxieties around the sustainability of some of these programs.

Employer loan assistance is rare – offered only by an estimated 8% of employers, per the APTA survey – although loan repayment is gaining popularity as a benefit that allows employers to differentiate themselves to hiring candidates. The scarcity of employer assistance is driven in part by the current regulatory scheme, which places a tax burden on employers who wish to contribute to employees' student loan payments. In February 2019, Congress introduced the Employer Participation in Repayment Act ([H.R. 1043/S. 460](#)), which would allow employers to contribute tax-free loan assistance up to a certain level for both federal and private loans. Advocacy on behalf of this bill and similar efforts can help expand employers' ability to match their benefits packages to the true needs of their employees and ease the student debt burden among professionals. The federal Public Service Loan Forgiveness program also needs to be reviewed for ways to make it more dependable.

Even when employers do offer loan repayment or assistance, PTs and PTAs could be made better aware of the value of this benefit as they compare employment packages. A small-scale study that surveyed early-career PTs (DPT classes of 2010-2016) indicated that loan repayment was not perceived as a top factor in choosing their first job, even for those with outstanding student loan debt ([Stepp, 2019](#)).

## **Investigate Options to Reconsider the DPT Curriculum**

Rising costs of higher education contribute significantly to the challenge of student debt. This is a complicated issue affected by factors far beyond PT education specifically. Unfortunately, calls for tempering increases in or reducing tuition likely will be put on hold as DPT programs – and all of higher education – struggle to respond to the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. DPT programs need to explore how they can reconsider their curricula to help decrease the financial burden on students. A challenge is that even with rigorous CAPTE standards to ensure that schools graduate PTs and PTAs with consistent knowledge and skill, programs vary because of factors that include history, mission, tradition, environment, and culture; not every solution would benefit every school. Programs need to review different options to determine which might best work for them – and which would not. Following are a few examples of alternatives that have been suggested by various entities\*:

- Considering or increasing credit for prior learning.
- Reviewing classroom credit hours and weeks of clinical education in schools that exceed CAPTE's minimum requirements, to decrease variation among programs.
- Moving from a clinical education system based on hours or weeks to a competency-based system.
- Sharing courses and administrative practices – both in creation and delivery – among programs and faculty so that schools do not have to reinvent the wheel for standardized material.
- Increasing the use of hybrid learning (combination of online and onsite). While literature on hybrid learning

specific to physical therapy is lacking, a PTJ Perspective notes that multiple studies generally support the success of hybrid learning in health care education in general ([Gagnon, 2020](#)). The move to remote learning in response to the COVID-19 health crisis may yield PT and PTA education models that could be shared outright or duplicated.

- Making use of regional clinical education consortia to reduce faculty time and the resulting costs at individual programs.

(\*While discussion of these options likely has occurred in multiple venues, the sources used for this report include the Education Leadership Partnership's response to APTA's Excellence in Physical Therapist Education Task Force and Best Practices for Physical Therapist Clinical Education Task Force; [Jette's 2016 PTJ Point of View article](#); and APTA President Sharon Dunn's [2018 presidential address to the House of Delegates](#).)

The [Education Leadership Partnership's efforts to develop a long-term strategic plan](#) for the future of professional and postprofessional physical therapy education, which builds on recommendations from APTA's Excellence in Physical Therapist Education Task Force and Best Practices for Physical Therapist Clinical Education Task Force, should address larger structural considerations for the learner continuum in the coming decades. Education research should be used to guide decision making, and outcomes data should be collected on these and any other potential alternatives to determine if they reduce costs and produce comparable or better outcomes, and for which types of programs they might work best.

## **Engage in Further Research for More Evidence-Based Data on Which to Base Additional Decisions and Actions**

While the APTA survey and other studies cited in this report reveal useful information, they also point to the need for more investigation and data collection of student debt data specific to PT and PTA education. Ambler recognized this in his [2020 PTJ study](#), noting: "Lack of available data and trends in the cost of physical therapist education and the potential for these trends to begin to effect practice choices, as they have in other professions, highlight the growing need for research in this area."

For example, many existing studies, such as those referred to in this report, have been small scale or single site. Surveys with wider and more diverse cohorts, including longitudinal surveys over time that might indicate trends, would provide more precise data and allow for more dissecting of demographic characteristics within the profession. Investigations of outcomes in schools that are exploring different approaches would help determine which approaches are most successful. Leveraging the use of data that currently exists and making it accessible to education researchers may help in analyzing opportunities for improved practices. Collaboration with other health disciplines to share data could provide more meaningful comparisons and perhaps foster coordinated approaches to address the problem.

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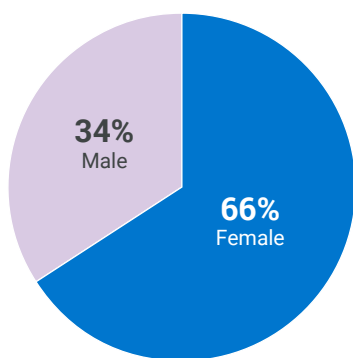
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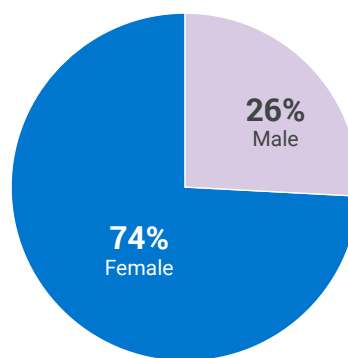
# Appendix: Demographics of Respondents

**Gender Identity:** Gender Identity. 66% of PT respondents and 74% of PTA respondents identified as female. 34% and 26%, respectively, identified as male. (Percentage of respondents who identified as “other” and “decline to state” are too small to represent in the graphs.)

**PT Respondents**



**PTA Respondents**



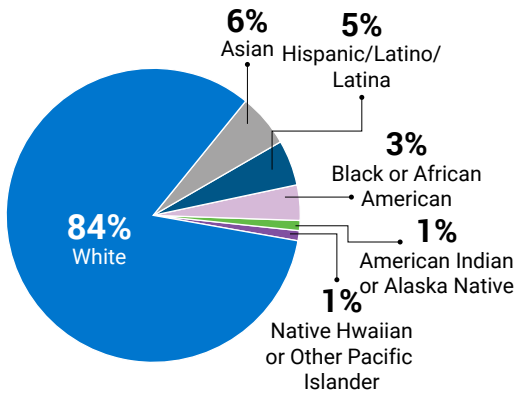
**Age.** The median age of PTs was 29 and of PTAs was 31. The majority of PT respondents were under the age of 35, while PTAs' ages were more evenly distributed.

Age Groups	% of PT Respondents	% of PTA Respondents
20-24	0.1%	5.7%
25-29	60.1%	32.4%
30-34	31.0%	26.9%
35-40	6.0%	11.3%
40-44	2.1%	9.0%
45-50	0.4%	6.2%
Over 50	0.4%	8.6%

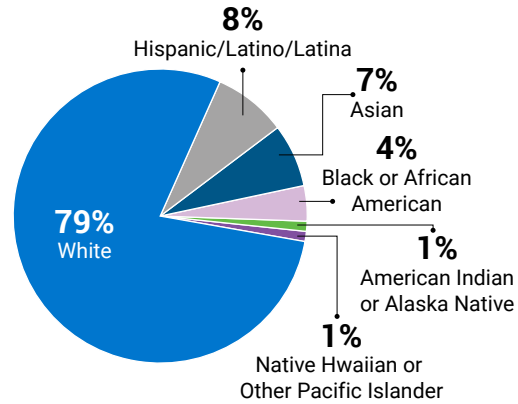


**Race.** The majority of PT and PTA respondents identified as white. Hispanic/Latino(a) and Asian were the next two largest self-identified racial groups. (Respondents could choose more than one option; 6.9% of PTs marked two or more races, and 11.1% of PTAs marked two or more races. Each pie chart slice represents the total number of respondents who selected that race category; for example, the percentage for “Asian” includes all respondents who identified as Asian, regardless of how many other groups they selected.)

**PT Respondents**

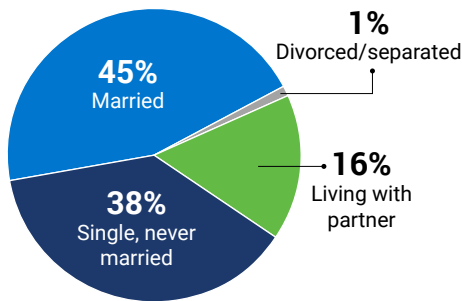


**PTA Respondents**

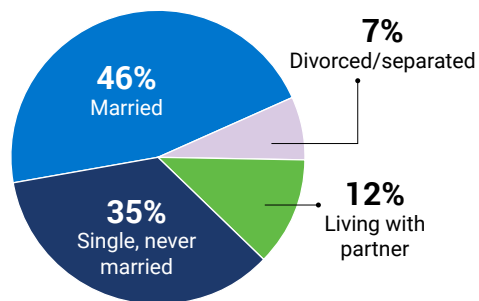


**Marital status.** Most PT and PTA respondents identified as married or single, with nearly half of each group identifying as married. (Percentage of respondents who selected “widowed” and “prefer not to answer” are too small to represent in the graphs.)

**PT Respondents**

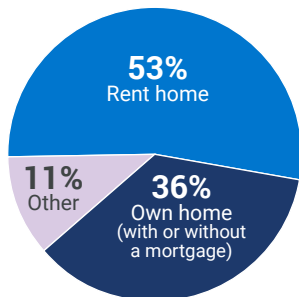


**PTAs Respondents**

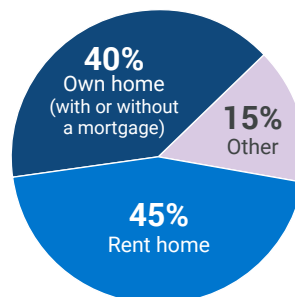


**Home ownership:** The majority of PT and PTA respondents either own their home or currently rent. In the “other” category, respondents mentioned living with friends, family, or a partner, often at no rent charge.

**PT Respondents**

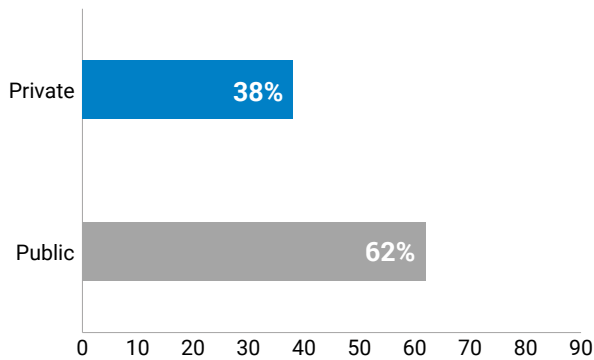


**PTA Respondents**

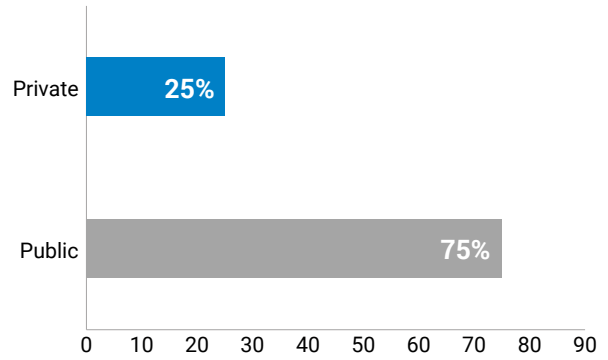


**Undergraduate institution type.** The majority of PT and PTA respondents who received an undergraduate education attended a public school, and, of those, 87% of PTs and 93% of PTAs paid in-state tuition. A higher percentage of PTs than PTAs attended private undergraduate education.

**PT Respondents**

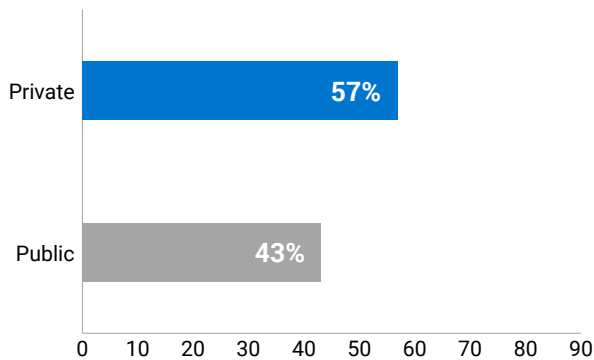


**PTA Respondents**

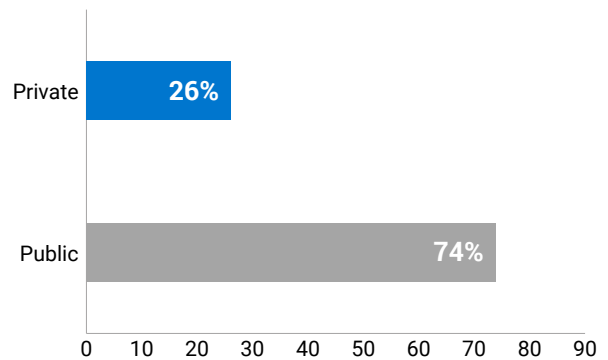


**PT and PTA program type.** The majority of PT respondents attended a private institution for their professional education. Of those who attended a public institution, 85% paid in-state tuition. Conversely, most PTAs attended a public institution, with 95% paying in-state tuition.

**PT Respondents**

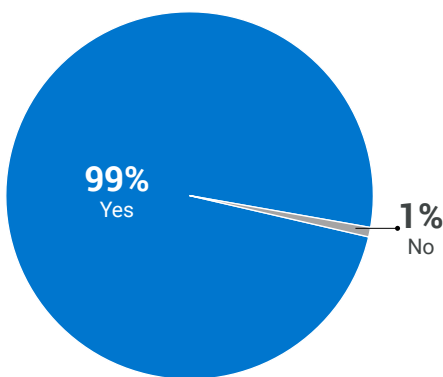


**PTA Respondents**

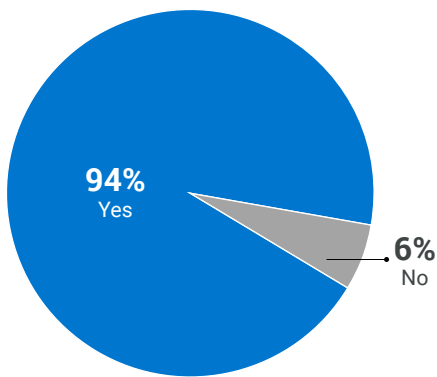


**Employment with the profession.** The overwhelming majority of PT and PTA respondents are currently employed in physical therapy positions.

**PT Respondents**



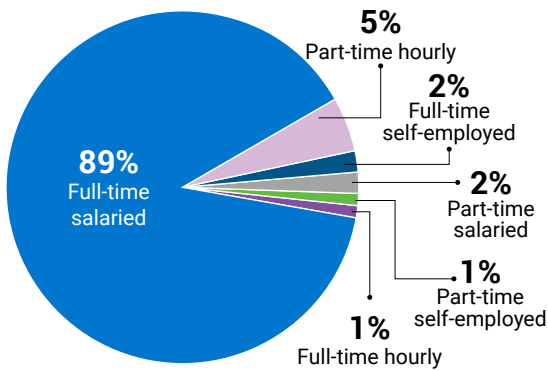
**PTA Respondents**



**PT and PTA employment status.** A strong majority of PT respondents are currently practicing full-time, salaried; over half of PTA respondents are currently working full-time, hourly.

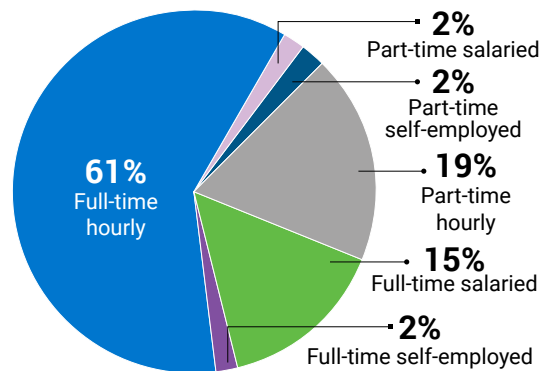
### PT Respondents

Among PTs who are employed



### PTA Respondents

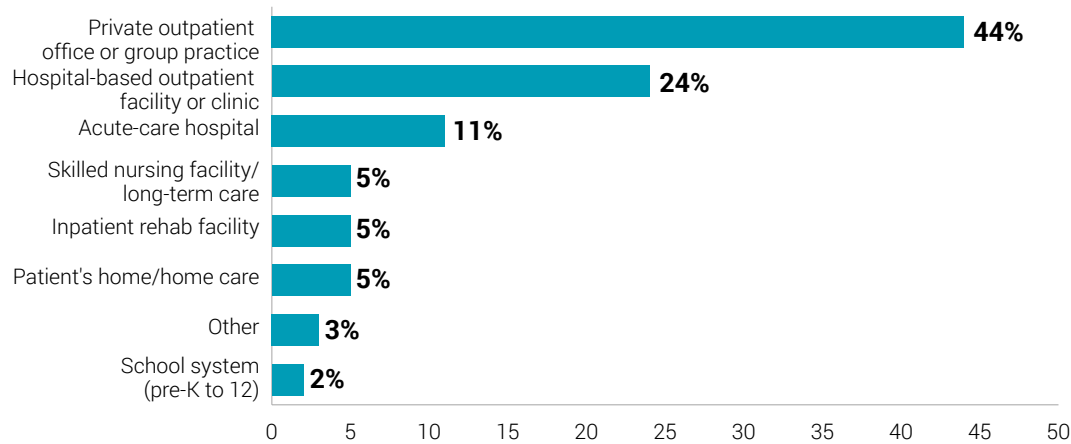
Among PTAs who are employed



**Practice setting.** Most PT and PTA respondents reported working in a private outpatient office or group practice.

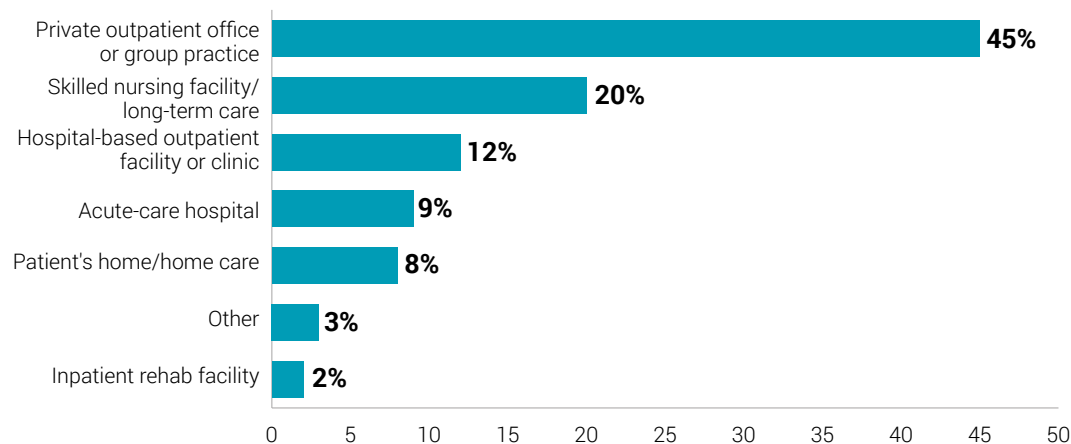
### PT Respondents

Among PTs who are employed



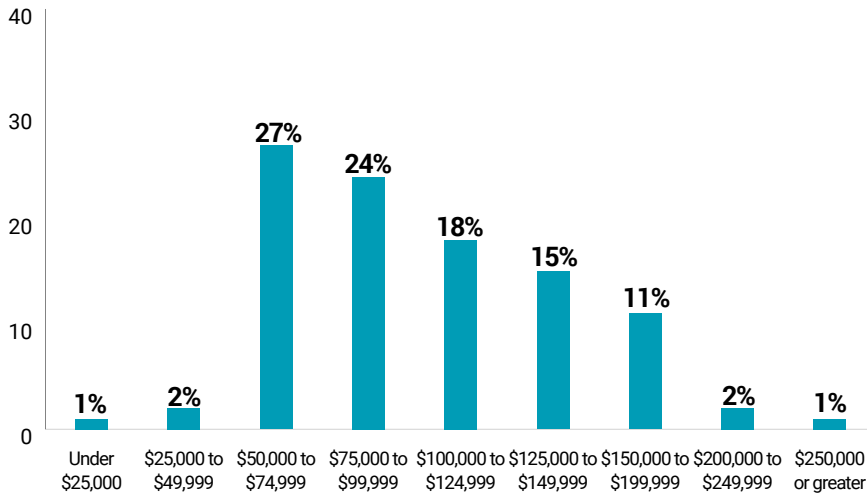
### PTA Respondents

Among PTAs who are employed



**Household income.** For both PT and PTA respondents, the most-often reported income range was \$50,000 to \$74,999.

### Household Income Range (Before Taxes) for PT Respondents



### Household Income Range (Before Taxes) for PTA Respondents

